

Bangtan Scholars and the Ethics of Care

Courtney Lazore

It all started with a single tweet. That might be a one-line horror story in our world permeated by social media and virality, but for us, it was the beginning. “Can someone please make a BTS fan account for those working in Academia/Research.” The tweet sparked interest from several ARMYs, and a few volunteered to make it happen.

Our fandom project—Bangtan Scholars—has since grown over the last few years into a complex effort to create a community of ARMY researchers. As ARMY is perhaps the most visible online fandom, our group is just one in a sea of fan endeavors ranging from voting projects to charity campaigns. Accounts maintained by ARMYs provide many services: assisting students with subject tutoring, teaching Korean language, providing instructions for streaming, offering mental health support, and educating others on medicine, law, and art. Despite the diversity of these groups, many ARMY-run organizations share a common thread beyond their devotion to BTS: helping others. It’s an observation that communicates something important about the core culture of ARMY fandom. Though there is much to be explored in the cultures and complexities of ARMY groups, this chapter focuses on the development of Bangtan Scholars, what drives our activities, and how we, as fans and researchers, intersect with the ethics of care.

Creating Bangtan Scholars

When Cecilia Perez was working on her MBA in Branding in 2017, she wanted to write her thesis on how ARMYs function as influencers for BTS. However, English-language

academic resources on BTS were scant, and her supervisor was not convinced her topic was viable. Though Cecilia later succeeded in writing her thesis on BTS and ARMY, the experience was still discouraging.

Just a few years later, in April 2020, Cecilia posted the tweet that pulled our disparate community together. Moving into group chats with the volunteers, the earliest vision for what Bangtan Scholars would become emerged: a platform for ARMY researchers to connect with one another, share resources with each other and the rest of ARMY, and promote their work. A major motivating factor for creating this group was Cecilia's memory of how helpful a support group would have been to her during her MBA program. She recalled how the "memory made me think ARMYs who've encountered this get disheartened whether they can actually do valuable research on BTS and ARMY. I wanted to spread knowledge and encourage ARMYs that you can infuse your passion for BTS into education."¹ Now, with like-minded friends, she was able to start such a community.

Work on Bangtan Scholars began as Cecilia decided our first steps and figured out what roles we needed to fill. Nicole Santero, who Cecilia had met at a conference, volunteered to work on our email list, social media content, and our directory. Rebecca Wright, who joined after responding to Cecilia's tweet, offered her expertise in running a Discord server. After Cecilia brought the project up with me, I signed on to help with newsletters, the website, and other content curation. Initially, additional ARMYs expressed interest in helping, but they were unable to commit due to their careers. Thus, Bangtan Scholars proceeded as four.

As a fandom for a musical act, ARMY is often a source of joy, entertainment, or escapism for fellow fans, so Cecilia's desire for an academic community for ARMY may seem surprising. But it's not. Her call for community building among ARMY researchers was a

¹ Cecilia Perez, in discussion with the author, 2022.

well-timed crystallization of desires, ideas, and goals that had been percolating for some time, thanks to the burgeoning interest in BTS research. Just three months earlier, in January 2020, the first BTS Global Interdisciplinary Conference was held at Kingston University in the United Kingdom. The conference, which was followed by three more in 2021, 2022, and 2023, served as one of the first efforts to formalize BTS Studies as a field. But this conference was unusual in that it wasn't just targeting academics and researchers—it was aimed at fans, too. Conference organizer Colette Balmain emphasized the importance of a non-hierarchical space, creating an open environment for both ARMY and researchers.

Unsurprisingly, Bangtan Scholars emerged as a natural offshoot of the conference. Each founding member attended, and our experiences there were formative. We drew motivation from the kinship we felt with other ARMYs, as we went from research presentations and discussions of BTS's impact to collectively watching live performances during lunch breaks. The conference's ethos inspired the root of our mission “to create a collaborative network that empowers those engaging in or interested in BTS scholarship to promote their work, exchange ideas, and expand knowledge across different disciplines and around the world.” We envisioned Bangtan Scholars as a place for ARMYs interested in research on BTS to “connect, inspire, and grow together.”

To achieve these goals, we decided on three main initiatives: maintaining a Twitter account, creating a resource database, and collating ARMY researcher profiles. On Twitter, we share research- and analysis-based materials on BTS and ARMY and promote academic events. Building our website proved to be a larger endeavor, but we set to work archiving much of the available academic (or otherwise pertinent) content published about BTS and ARMY into a resource library.² We further built out our library by cross-checking our resource list with another

² “Resources,” Bangtan Scholars, last modified March 2023, <https://www.bangtanscholars.com/resources>.

ARMY-led project called the #BTSSyllabus, a crowdsourcing initiative which endeavors to “make research, teaching, and writing about BTS more accessible” by cataloging content including blogs, videos, magazine articles, and academic pieces.³ Researcher profiles were the other major component of the website. Hoping to help ARMY researchers find each other, we posted profiles submitted to us that included names, contact details, specializations, and publications. It was important to us that we framed the idea of “researcher” or “scholar” with more flexibility than traditional academic definitions. While there may not be much space in academia for independent researchers, we hoped to offer such a space to anyone seriously engaged in research, including fans, students, and professionals working outside of universities.

Overall, our initiatives have been successful. Our Twitter account has seen steady growth since we opened it in 2020 and as of mid-2023 has 47,000 followers. We collected over 400 resource citations in our online library. And after receiving 687 respondents to our call for researcher profiles, we posted a directory of 273 ARMY researchers on the initial version of our website.

As with any new endeavor, there were bumps along the way. While we succeeded in a few key areas, we also had to abandon other initiatives. For example, part of our original planning involved a newsletter and a Discord server. But it’s difficult to bring multiple goals to fruition with only a team of four, especially when we have our own obligations like work and school. Though the newsletter and Discord would offer value to our community, we didn’t have the capacity.

Perhaps a more arduous challenge has been positioning ourselves in that somewhat contentious, liminal space between academics and fans. We’d like to be a bridge between these

³ “#BTSSyllabus Project,” Epps-Robertson, Lee, and Nguyen, last modified March 23, 2023, <https://bit.ly/BTSSyllabusProject>.

subsets, but how do we navigate this space? How will we define what a “Bangtan Scholar” is, or what valuable scholarship is? Bangtan Scholars may be seen as an “aca-fan” group. The term aca-fan (“academic fan”) has become popular among career academics who also identify as fans, often studying their fandoms as part of their ongoing research. But what best fits our definition of a “Bangtan Scholar” is more in line with two terms offered by Matt Hills: scholar-fan (identical to aca-fan) and fan-scholar, where the first word indicates the person’s primary identity.⁴ Expanding our definition to include fan-scholars gives us more flexibility, as one doesn’t need to be a professor or career academic to be a fan-scholar.

Similarly, we have a broader understanding of not only who “counts” in aca-fandom, but what “counts” as research. While formal, rigorous research is necessary, we don’t limit what we share to published research. Instead, we recognize the significance of informal fan-created analyses, such as blog posts or video essays that critically examine BTS and ARMY topics. Our freedom to broaden what “counts” is due to our independence from academic institutions. Bangtan Scholars can set its own goals and rules, without interference from other academic structures. We’re accountable only to ourselves and our ARMY community. This freedom to operate independently allows Bangtan Scholars to democratize its corner of the academic world, providing an alternative perspective to that of traditional academia that we hope is open and inclusive.

Our position as a group focused on research within our larger fandom presents us with another challenge. Disagreements between fandoms and those who research them are not uncommon, and when tensions do inevitably arise, we will by definition be caught in the middle. No matter what action we take, we may displease people on either side. For example, some fans may feel that researchers are outsiders who are invading their safe spaces; they may feel

⁴ Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 11-15.

watched, or like their privacy is being invaded (e.g., when researchers quote social media posts or use screenshots without permission). Or, fans may take issue with how researchers speak about BTS or ARMY, such as criticizing ARMY's streaming strategy as hyperconsumption, or characterizing the entire fandom as a monolith. Sometimes the problem is guilt by association. When Bangtan Scholars posted information about a BTS-related conference that included work by a researcher some fans disapproved of, we were perceived by some fans as "disloyal." Promoting research activities in general can result in comments like "fans are not lab rats," regardless of whether Bangtan Scholars itself is involved with the activity. Conversely, not sharing information about conferences or projects that also involve the work of many ARMYs would be a disservice to the fan-scholars we have. Fan-scholars and their unique experiences can further enrich the research landscape while also respecting the customs of fandom, and we must do what we can to support their work too. The best Bangtan Scholars can do is to try to mediate by offering information to both sides. We can help researchers understand that studying fandoms requires additional ethical considerations. We can advocate for more ethical research by emphasizing the importance of robust informed consent, identifying oneself as a researcher, or being receptive to fan feedback. For ARMY, we can offer information about participating in research studies and how to identify a good informed consent document, to help them make their own decisions. Or, we can try to answer questions they may have about a published study or the research process itself. It's often a lose-lose situation, but learning how to honor both sides of our identity and be a stronger bridge between them is something we negotiate on a regular basis.

So, where are we now? I believe we, like BTS, are entering our "chapter two." While we're still focused on maintaining an active Twitter account and promoting the ongoing BTS-related research efforts, we also renewed our focus on creating a Discord server. In the last

few weeks, we invited existing community members to the soft launch of our server and are in the process of building it up. We also relaunched our website and took a major step forward by announcing our first event, a virtual symposium to take place in fall 2023. Cecilia and I have spent hours contemplating, writing, and revising internal policies for ourselves as a collective. Policies and processes are necessary for any group to function well, especially one that values consideration of platform, fandom, and community. What do we do when there's mis/disinformation about BTS, ARMY, or fandom research circulating on social media? What events, articles, blogs, or books do we promote? What topics can we comment on as a collective, as opposed to individuals? How will we manage our Discord community so that it's a comfortable space for everyone? What can we do to bolster ethical consideration among ARMY researchers and others who research from the outside? How will we operate as fans? As researchers? There are multiple aspects that require careful consideration, which we did not anticipate at the start. What has become clear throughout our work, however, is how we grew out of, and continue to negotiate, care.

Bangtan Scholars and Care

The ethics of care (or care ethics) is a moral theory that places personal relationships and human interconnection at the heart of ethical decision making. At its core, the concept of "care" values meeting needs in our interrelated existences, whether it's the needs of others, ourselves, or the world. The history of care ethics is complex; there is no singular definition of "care." Perhaps the most relevant definition for us was offered by Joan Tronto (a political theorist and care ethicist) and Berenice Fisher (a feminist scholar) who suggested that caring is an "activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live

in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment.”⁵ With this definition in mind, we can identify care in the nature and activity of many ARMY communities, including Bangtan Scholars.

Tronto illuminated four phases of care; we can use these phases of care, in addition to several tiers of care, to elucidate how Bangtan Scholars centers on this concept. First, Tronto suggested thinking of care as a practice, rather than “conceiving of care as a principle or as an emotion.”⁶ If care is a practice, then it “involves both thought and action” which are “interrelated” and “directed toward some end.”⁷ This course of thought translated into action is illustrated by her four phases of care: caring about, taking care of, care-giving, and care-receiving. The first phase, caring about, simply requires that one realizes there are needs that should be met. Bangtan Scholars was born out of one tweet that recognized the need for a space that connects ARMYs who do research. Though articulated as the need of one person, voicing this need brought together others who felt similarly. When setting up Bangtan Scholars, we believed ARMY researchers needed a supportive place to go for academic resources, information, or advice. As a second charge, we placed importance on the need for both ARMY researchers and ARMY in general to be more aware of the research that takes place within our community.

The second phase of care is taking care of; as in, someone decides to take responsibility for the identified need and figures out what to do about it. When Cecilia decided to formally create Bangtan Scholars, she made the first attempt at taking care of the needs she perceived within ARMY research. As our project continues, we reevaluate what needs we can fulfill, such as when we recently shifted our focus back to developing better internal policies for our group as

⁵ Fisher and Tronto, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring,” 40.

⁶ Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 108.

⁷ Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 108.

well as a Discord server for our community.

The third phase of care is the action phase of care-giving—performing the actions that will fulfill the need. Providing information on Twitter, populating a library of research, and creating our directory were all actions we took to provide for our community’s needs. As mentioned, care sometimes needs reassessment. While one of our biggest goals was to create an ARMY researcher directory, we deleted it in 2021. This decision was also made through the care process of identifying how to best serve the needs of our community—when we received negative messages from fans upset that research was being conducted in their spaces, we felt our community members’ right to privacy outweighed our goal of encouraging collaborations. We went back to brainstorming. We searched for an alternative that would support ARMY researchers and their need for a network while also trying to offer privacy, especially since we collected contact details. Balancing the need for community building and the right to keep one’s information private is one reason we began development on older initiatives, such as Discord. Weighing our options was necessary for this decision-making process to be ethical, and also allowed us to better preserve our relationship to our community, even when that required change.

Finally, the fourth phase of care is care-receiving, or when those who received care respond, letting the care-giver know if their needs have been met. We observe how our efforts are taken, but we are not the ultimate decision-makers when it comes to whether our attempts to provide care are satisfactory. It is, however, up to us what we do with the feedback, and how we choose to change (or not) moving forward. Given our place as a bridge between ARMY and researchers, the loop of these phases of care greatly factors into what course we chart next.

While Tronto’s phases of care are useful when applied to Bangtan Scholars, there is an important difference. Care is most often thought of as an in-person practice; there’s very little

written about care in digital spaces. Most of what Bangtan Scholars and other ARMY groups do is perform digital community care, often for people we will never meet offline or develop a deeper relationship with beyond our shared identity as ARMY. Our shared identity is a crux for motivating these care practices. While care may be found in other online communities, it's generally focused on supporting others in relation to the subject of that community. An online gaming community may share content updates about their game of choice, or create resources to help other players improve their skills or better understand the in-game lore. But, unlike ARMY groups, they aren't helping their community members with needs that lie outside of the game. In contrast, Bangtan Scholars does not meet needs that are absolutely necessary for supporting BTS's career or ARMY's fandom participation. We don't teach others how to buy BTS's music or stream and vote, and one can participate in ARMY without interacting with Bangtan Scholars' resources. But ARMY constructs essentially a digital village or microcosm, where different groups can have specializations that account for needs outside of directly supporting BTS's music. By leveraging our online world, Bangtan Scholars can provide care for BTS and ARMY's extraneous needs.

The digital care offered by Bangtan Scholars occurs in several classifications: care towards BTS, towards ARMY, and towards ARMY researchers. We demonstrate our care towards BTS by amplifying work that considers how BTS and ARMY impact culture, industry, and fans themselves, and by trying to counteract harmful, stereotypical narratives that exist about boy bands and fandoms. Our group aims to help preserve an accurate account of BTS and their fandom, because otherwise, we are at the mercy of the narratives presented by mass media and published research. Not all media and research treat BTS or ARMY unfairly, but it's imperative that groups like ours make an effort to promote accurate information and fans' lived experiences.

ARMY should have a voice in our own story.

We also demonstrate care towards ARMY by expanding awareness of and access to research. Fans should be aware of the research being conducted in their fandoms, because researchers rely on data generated by fans. It's crucial for the community to know what their data, even publicly available data, are being used for. We hope to help more ARMYs learn of the research that's available as well as opportunities to participate, which results in more accurate data. Helping more fans become aware of research outputs also creates opportunities for fan commentary on published research. Community concerns about research results are valuable and should help inform future projects. Likewise, fans deserve easy access to the papers published about them; it's our space, after all. But academic papers are often not widely circulated, hard to find, or exist behind paywalls. By expanding access to research on BTS and ARMY, Bangtan Scholars can further democratize its part of the academic community.

Determining what we share across our platforms also requires some ethical assessment, where we strive to make choices based on the objectivity required of research tempered with the lens of fandom. For example, we may choose not to promote research published by someone who has been disrespectful or prejudiced towards the fandom (stereotypes of toxicity, "screaming teenage girls," etc.), or who has invaded privacy by sharing screenshots of social media posts without permission. We may share a response to such research that calls into question its conclusions and ethical underpinning. And we decline requests to promote calls for research participants if those documents don't have proper informed consent details. Learning how we can best care for the broader ARMY community is a process, and Bangtan Scholars intends to pivot to meet needs as best as we can.

We also demonstrate care towards our fellow ARMY researchers, as we try to provide

them with community, support, and education. Sometimes that care comes in unexpected forms, like deleting our directory to protect privacy. But we have future plans for better resources for ARMY researchers, including the Discord and resources on conducting ethical research and informed consent. Having more ARMYs involved in research is desirable, because we can bring expertise to the field that may otherwise not exist. Bangtan Scholars can help budding ARMY researchers on their journey, and we hope to nurture great relationships among our community by focusing on care.

All of this sounds like an awful lot of work, and that's because it is. Why put in so much effort into something that some might see as a hobby? Because we *care*. We care about BTS and ARMY. We care about preserving BTS's legacy and sharing available research as widely as possible. We care about supporting ARMYs who want to get involved in research. Our care makes it worth the effort. I believe identifying and applying the ethics of care framework to our operations as Bangtan Scholars helps us better understand our own motivations and actions, as well as how we might continue down our path with this philosophy in mind.

On the Caring Path

As we work on finalizing plans for our second chapter, we keep the focus on care. How can we infuse care into our policies? How can we create a supportive environment for ARMY researchers to grow and thrive? What can we do to better care for our community through our projects? These are the questions we continue to meditate upon. There's so much more we'd like to do as Bangtan Scholars, should the opportunity arise. Plenty of our aspirations would allow us to care for other needs. But the core of Bangtan Scholars for us will always be a sustainable online (and sometimes offline) community that encourages ARMY researchers from all

backgrounds and experience levels while also liaising with the ARMY community. If we can achieve that while also championing caring relationships, I think that's all we could ask for.

Ultimately, whether spreading how-tos on fandom activities, organizing campaigns, sharing mental health resources, or creating communities to support a subset of ARMY, so many ARMY-created groups exhibit an ethic of care. Operating within care helps provide a roadmap for our group, and this model opens many possibilities for ARMY organizations. Ethics of care can also have wider implications for online fandoms, especially where there is a population of aca-fans and fan-scholars. Academia is hierarchical and sometimes closed-minded regarding what subjects or populations matter and who should be allowed to participate in research; care ethics shows us one way to think beyond traditional academic structures and foster more supportive, more inclusive spaces for both researchers and fans. When we shift the focus to caring relationships, we can help those relationships thrive, help others feel more respected, and build better communities for fostering connections. Care ethics can also help smooth over some of the tensions that exist between fans, aca-fans, and fan-scholars, breaking down borders instead of constructing more. Perhaps Bangtan Scholars can serve as a model for how to do better in academia, as well as in the world we all share.

Works Cited

Fisher, Berenice, and Joan Tronto. "Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring." In *Circles of Care:*

Work and Identity in Women's Lives, edited by Emily Abel and Margaret Nelson, 36-54.

Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991.

Hills, Matthew. *Fan Cultures*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Tronto, Joan. *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. New York:
Routledge, 1993.